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The Surreal Conditions of Modernism

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Article

Dream Poems. The Surreal Conditions of Modernism

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Abstract: The article discusses three Swedish dream poems: Artur Lundkvist's "Om natten älskar jag någon . . ." from *Nattens broar* (1936), Gunnar Ekelöf's "Monolog med dess hustru" from *Stroutnes* (1955), and Tomas Tranströmer's "Drömseminarium" from *Det vilda torget* (1983). These authors and their poems all relate to European Surrealism. However, they do not only support the fundamental ideas of the Surrealist movement, they also represent reservations about, and corrections to, this movement. The article illuminates different aspects of dream poems and discusses the status of this poetic genre and its relation to Surrealism throughout the twentieth century.

Keywords: Nordic modernism; poetry; surrealism; dream

In modernist poetry, writings are not necessarily something you write, and dreams are not necessarily something you dream. Here, the boundaries are far from fixed. Modernist works often combine different aspects, not just to break with earlier norms and categorizations, but equally to create a freer flow between forms and genres. This also applies to the relationship between poems and dreams. In the modernist tradition, many poems thematize dreams or try to adopt their form. To say about a modernist writer, that he or she writes like a dream, is not always just a normative statement. Rather, it can also be a fact.

As a category, dream poems speak both of the modernist self and of the relationship of the self with the world. Dreams are inextricably linked to the self and illuminate a mental space that contrasts with the physical exterior. In the literature on modernism, dreams are often described as places to which the modernist poet flees when trying to escape from reality. Together with the imagination and the myth, the dream is a privileged place for poetry that forsakes objective reality. Appropriating Hugo Friedrich's concept from *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik* (1956), a derealization takes place; a movement away from recognizable reality. In relation to Baudelaire, Friedrich writes that modernists are aiming at poetry that does not copy but transform. Furthermore, he states that "among Baudelaire's terms for this ability to transform and transpose the real (derealization), two terms return time and again: dream and imagination (*rêve*, imagination)" (Friedrich [1956] 1968, p. 56).¹

In contrast to Friedrich, who, in continuation of Baudelaire's homage to the dream that is called "perfect as the crystal" (Friedrich [1956] 1968, p. 57), perceives the dream as a contribution to the positive valuation of the inorganic reality, stands Kurt Leonhard. In his *Moderne Lyrik* (1963), the occurrence of dreams is seen as part of a turn towards the primitive and elementary (Leonhard 1963, p. 49). Here, the dream is not understood as a tribute to the artificial. Rather, it manifests a movement towards a new naturalness. However, if, according to Leonhard, the use of dreams does not relate to 'surpassing' the real, it relates to 'undercutting' it—the pathological and obscene are also mentioned. Despite the immediate differences between Friedrich and Leonhard, in both cases the dream is seen as part of a break with common reality.

¹ Here and in the following, if not otherwise specified, then translations from references written in Swedish and Danish are mine.

However, when thinking about what it means to dream, it seems obvious that it is not just turning away from reality. The dream is not just something unreal; it represents another kind of reality, which, although not of the same tangible nature as the outer world, does not have less authenticity. The dream is a reality that unfolds in an inner space—a world revealed when the outer space is shrouded in darkness. With Astradur Eysteinnsson, one can say that “far from rejecting the real world, modernism is seeking reality at a different level of human existence, reality as it is processed by the human consciousness” (Eysteinnsson [1990] 1992, p. 184).

The relationship between dream poems and reality is also complicated by the fact that, in addition to creating mental realities, such poems may be recordings of actual dreams. Dream poems are dealing with a deeper reality or an inner substance, and thus the connection between dreams and the subconscious becomes obvious. Freud’s description of the dream as the royal road to the subconscious is famous, and the twentieth century is often depicted as the century of depth psychology. It was Freud and Jung’s century, in which the platonic model was turned upside down and the individual was no longer to seek truth in a higher, but rather, a lower reality.

This change has had many consequences. As regards literature, psychoanalysis has especially influenced Surrealism, which is the modernist movement that has most strongly adopted the dream. Therefore, the concept of *Surrealism* is important in the discussion of the relationship between dream poems and reality. Significantly, the word Surrealism can be translated into ‘super realism’, which implies that the connection to reality is not denied; on the contrary, it is emphasized, but at another level. This is a level which, according to Freud, is often thought of as ‘under’, but is nevertheless said to be ‘over’ or ‘super’, and as a result of this metaphor alone, it holds a positive value. Breton’s first Surrealist manifesto of 1924 defined the term as follows: “Surrealism is based on the belief in the higher reality of certain forms of associations which, before Surrealism, remained unaffected, in the almighty dream and in the unintelligible play of thought” (Breton [1962] 1972, p. 36). Inspired by Freud’s interpretations of dreams, Surrealism explores and gives a voice to the subconscious. In Surrealism, poems and dreams unite as catalysts for what the Surrealists perceive as the authentic reality of the human being. Automatic writing and dream poems become key literary forms of expression in an art that denies a traditional realistic aesthetic, and instead requires that language adopt the mysterious and illogical character of the dream.

Although the intention of Surrealism is to reach the immediate and authentic core of human beings, the issue is not as unproblematic as it may sound. Language necessarily acts as a mediator, which has been repeatedly pointed out. Bernt Olsson’s book *Vid språkets gränser* (1995), for example, discusses Breton’s confidence in automatic writing:

It is clear, however, that complete spontaneity can never be achieved. It is prevented by the writing process itself, by the rules of conduct given, and by disturbances from the outside that can hardly be avoided. You must therefore agree with Starobinski when he says that you may believe that Surrealism made a sincere attempt to achieve spontaneity, but that vigilant control and conscious supervision always intervene. Additionally, it is highly doubtful whether language allows the spontaneity. Every attempt to express something in words requires work of consciousness and that what is expressed is transformed through language. (Olsson 1995, p. 116)

Thus, the declared effort of Surrealism is somewhat paradoxical. Its goal cannot be entirely accomplished, and Surrealism therefore appears more like an intention than a fully realized practice. Surrealism itself has a utopian character and can as such be compared to the dream, which is the common denominator of the poems to be discussed in the following, namely Artur Lundkvist’s “Om natten älskar jag någon . . . ” from *Nattens broar* (Lundkvist 1936), Gunnar Ekelöf’s “Monolog med dess hustru” from *Strömtes* (Ekelöf 1955), and Tomas Tranströmer’s “Drömseminarium” from *Det vilda torget* (Tranströmer 1983). These authors can all be related to European Surrealism and do not only support the fundamental ideas of the movement, but also contain reservations and corrections to this. Furthermore, they propose viewing Surrealism as a literary movement whose validity extends

beyond the historical period in which it was launched; that is, as a mode of expression that stresses the importance of the dream and the subconscious across time boundaries.

1. Dreaming of A Woman

Artur Lundkvist's "Om natten älskar jag någon . . ." is a poem that promotes a surreal dream universe that encircles itself and its dissonant content: The poem begins by depicting a lyrical I who loves someone at night whom he cannot find at daytime. The subsequent 10 parallel-constructed lines identify this figure and finally state: "It is her I love at night but can never find at daytime" [Det är henne jag älskar om natten men aldrig kan finna om dagen] (l. 12). The poem relates to the Surrealist tradition by focusing on dreams and the subconscious, which is also an earmark of the entire work in which it occurs.

Nattens broar marks a breakthrough for the fascination with Surrealism that Lundkvist developed through the 1930s, and along with *Sirensång* (Lundkvist 1937), *Nattens broar* is his most complete Surrealist work. Already the title of the book refers to the Surrealist project and specifically to Breton's *Les vases communicants* (Espmark 1964, p. 223), in which the poet's task is described as forming a bridge between the inner and outer worlds. Lundkvist contributed to introducing Surrealism in Sweden, and in his essay "Surrealismen: det okändas erövring" from *Ikarus' flykt* (1939), he explains Breton's ideas:

The knowledge of the dream, in which the emotional life manifests itself symbolically, should now serve to overcome this gap so that the correct connection (after being more or less broken over the millennia) occurs again between the two communicating vessels: the dream and reality, the feeling and the thought. (Lundkvist [1939] 1991, p. 104)

Surrealism gives poetry a privileged position and, in contrast to the epistemic of the realistic tradition of prose, it depicts a hidden reality. It is therefore significant that the title of the poem enhances the night. The night is the time of the dream, and as mentioned above, the dream is perceived as a main source of the subconscious life of the soul. Aside from the fact that *Nattens broar* often explicitly tematizes the dream, the language of the work is permeated by the dream's distinctive logic, and is marked by a suggestive mysticism and the visualization of thoughts. In the second part of Lundkvist's book, the key themes are the woman, love and the loss of love, and these aspects are also predominant in "Om natten älskar jag någon . . .".

At night I love somebody that I can never find at
daytime.
She has fire in her eyes, a storm in her hair.
She has a thin dress dotted with thorn roses
She encloses her own valley with seven hills
She always laughs at a mirror that no one else sees.
She can like a dice show an eye or six
She is a sliding gravel grave with a bouquet of poppies on the top of
the crest.
She is Leda who wades through the marsh, seeking for her swan.
She has a terrace facing the sea where I see her many evenings
in a dress of sea-fire while sunken sails breathes in the depths.
She says: Call me The Night, then you find the root of the good
that at daytime is called the evil.
She wades further out where the ebb tide never ceases.
It is her I love at night but can never find at
daytime.

[Om natten älskar jag någon som jag aldrig kan finna om
 dagen.
 Hon har en eldsvåda i ögonen, en storm i håret.
 Hon har en tunn klänning översållad med törnrosor.
 Hon omsluter sin egen dal med sju kullar.
 Hon ler alltid mot en spegel som ingen annan ser.
 Hon kan likt en tärning visa ett öga eller sex.
 Hon är en glidande grusgrop med en bukett vallmor högst på
 krönet.
 Hon är Leda som vadar genom kärren, sökande sin svan.
 Hon har en terrass mot havet där jag ser henne många kvällar
 i klänning av mareld medan sjunkna segel andas i djupet.
 Hon säger: Kalla mig Natten, då finner du roten till det goda
 som om dagen kallas det onda.
 Hon vadar allt längre ut där ebben aldrig upphör.
 Det är henne jag älskar om natten men aldrig kan finna om
 dagen.]

The poem describes the night as a privileged place, offering something that cannot be found at daytime. Without directly mentioning the word dream, the poem plays with the dual meaning of the word: It deals with the lyrical I's dream of a woman, in the sense that it concerns his ideal woman, and in that it describes a nightly room of thoughts in which a woman appears. Thus, the night gives access to a woman of a very special caliber. The poem's ten descriptions revolve around the woman's erotic and mythical appearance, attributing to her a character at once alluring and dangerous. Even though the woman is repeatedly described, however, she does not take on a concrete form. As I will return to later, she is formed of dreams; she is made of thought rather than of flesh and blood.

Nevertheless, she oozes sex. The first description already has unmistakably erotic undertones when referring to her glowing, passionate look and the disorder in her hair, and in the subsequent line, she appears as a veritable Aphrodite: As at the Botticelli painting "The birth of Venus" she is almost naked and shrouded in roses (l. 3). However, the erotic descriptions do not come alone; they also resonate something dangerous. Fire is not only the emblem of passion and love, but also of dead and destruction, and the rose is not only the flower of love. The myth says it was colored by the blood of Aphrodite as she tore herself on her way to her lover Adonis' dead body. In addition to being associated with eroticism and love, fire and roses are linked to death, and as the color red reoccurs with the poppies in the line: "She is a sliding gravel grave with a bouquet of poppies on the top of the crest." [Hon är en glidande grusgrop med en bukett vallmor högst på krönet] (l. 7), the mind is guided not only towards the attractive and unattainable nature of these flowers. The poppy is beautiful and porous on the surface, but inside it contains a potentially dangerous poison. The woman steps forward as a *femme fatale*.

This duality or multifaceted character of the woman is explicitly compared to a dice that can "show an eye or six" [visa ett öga eller sex] (l. 6). This line assigns to her a somewhat monstrous character, thus contributing to the adventurous and mythological descriptions that characterize the poem. These perspectives are also present in the number seven, which is the sum of the dice's eyes. In addition, they appear in the image of the valley with seven hills (l. 4) and relate to the mirror (l. 5), which is said to bring seven years of misfortune if it is broken. Furthermore, they are present in the aforementioned allusion to Aphrodite, in the portrayal of Leda and the Swan (l. 8), and in the description of the woman's position on the terrace (l. 9). Here she alludes to a siren, suggesting that her enchanting appearance has caused the loss of many ships.

Furthermore, these mythological figures all relate to water—and primarily, to its perilous qualities. As the nickname Anadyomene indicates, Aphrodite is not only attached to the shattered sea. The focus is on Leda, just as she "wades through the marsh" [vadar genom kärren] (l. 8), and when the description

of the woman approaches the portrayal of a siren, this is because her terrace faces the sea while “sunken sails breathe in the depths” [sjunkna segel andas i djupet] (l. 9). Finally, the last fixation of the woman is related to the sea as well. It reads: “She wades further out where the ebb tide never ceases” [Hon vadar allt längre ut där ebben aldrig upphör] (l. 11). However, this description has the features of a paradox: If you go further into the water it supposedly becomes deeper, but instead, the woman comes to a place where the ebb tide never ends. How is that? Does this mean that she will keep causing shipwreck? Does it mean that the woman will still pose a danger to those in her presence?

This is possible. In any case, the description reinforces the amazing and unreal aura radiating from the woman; through the eyes of a man she appears at the same time elevated and destructive, captivating and demonized. The complex character of the woman’s portrait is also consistent with the fourth and fifth lines that focus on her self-sufficiency and self-esteem, as well as convergent with the embracing gesture of the structure of the poem. Finally, it becomes evident in the last stanza that the woman establishes a universe for herself. For a moment, the woman gets to speak and says: “Call me The Night, then you find the root of the good that at daytime is called the evil” [Kalla mig Natten, då finner du roten till det goda som om dagen kallas det onda] (l. 10). The woman identifies herself with the night. Not only does the woman appear in the night, she is the night. Gaston Bachelard comments on this connection between the night and the woman in *L’eau et les Rêves* (1942). Discussing the combination of water and night, he notes that: “If the night is personified, it is a goddess that nothing can resist, who sweeps everything, who conceals everything; it is the goddess of the veil” (Bachelard [1942] 1991, p. 138).

In the woman’s speech, the night contrasts with the day, and she advocates a reversal of common moral hierarchies. She represents a connection to the darkened side of life and is a symbol of hidden human forces, something which is also indicated by the root metaphor of her statement. With reference to Freud, we might say that she incarnates Eros and Thanatos. These concepts sum up her mythological character as well as the references to life and death in the poem, where the woman appears at once as erotically alluring and life-threatening to those who come close to her.

It is, therefore, evident that it is not a concrete woman to which the lyrical I is attracted. It is a distinctive feature of Artur Lundkvist’s depictions of women that they rise above the singular level. As Carl-Eric Nordberg put it in *Det skapande ögat. En färd genom Artur Lundkvists författarskap* (1981):

The woman becomes a myth. She is lifted out of her individual life. She is over-coated with the paralysis of a parable depriving her of identity and personality. As a compensation, she is transformed into a natural power. She incarnates the elements and primitive forces”. (Nordberg 1981, p. 136)

The woman condenses essential human forces. Thus, she alludes to the dream that is the prerequisite for her appearance, while also constituting its embodiment. The subconscious is the source of dreams—both in Freud, who sees it as the symbolization of displaced childhood conflicts, and in Jung, who considers it from an archetypal perspective. In a visual and condensed form, the dream shows that which cannot be said directly. Moreover, by constituting a condensed and indirect form of expression, the dream is also closely related to poetic language. Between the woman, the dream, and poetry, there are clear correspondences.

A particularly intimate connection between the dream and Surrealist poetic language lies in the priority of the visual. The paradoxical nature of the poem is situated at the trope level, and from a stylistic point of view, it is especially the colliding images of the poem that connect it with the language of Surrealism.² These images allow the very same woman to be described as a valley, a dice, a sliding

² In his introducing article to Surrealism in *Ikarus’ flykt* (1939), Lundkvist describes the function of the poetic image in a way that is indicative of his own Surrealist poetry: “The image plays a crucial role in this poetry: its world is identical to the world of imagery in which everything is possible and all opposites can be united. The image assumes an almost mythical meaning for the surrealists” (Lundkvist [1939] 1991, p. 108).

gravel grave, Leda and much more. As Surrealist poetry enters the footsteps of the dream, its intense images become a way to create a bridge between the conscious and the subconscious, between the inner and outer worlds. "Om natten älskar jag någon . . ." is such a bridge.

2. The Grotesqueness of Dreams

Gunnar Ekelöf is also one of the great dreamers of poetry. Already in his 1932 debut collection, the dream plays a crucial role, and in *Dedikation* (1934) and *Sorgen och stjärnan* (1936) it is a very frequent subject. However, the dream does not only occupy a central position in Ekelöf's writings from the 1930s, when Surrealism was in its prime in Europe. Both Ekelöf's own poetry and the literary studies of it make it clear that the dream is emblematic of his entire authorship. Thus, in his monograph *Gunnar Ekelöf* (1997), Anders Olsson states that the dream is "one of Ekelöf's most important ways into creation" (Olsson 1997, p. 56).

Even though the importance of the dream in Ekelöf's poetry is not limited to the historical period of Surrealism, there is a close connection between the two in his case. Artur Lundkvist was not alone in introducing Surrealism in Sweden. Ekelöf was another active figure in this venture and, in addition to articles, he published the book *fransk surrealism* (1933). In this book, he presented the movement and also translated texts from some of its leading figures, including Breton, Éluard, Dali and Tzara. In analogy with the dream representing a continuous motive in his writing, Surrealist traits are found throughout his works. Even at a time when Ekelöf's explicit Surrealist commitment is a long way back in time, we find poems that can be classified as Surrealist. "Monolog med dess hustru" from *Strountes* (1955) belongs in this category.

Monologue with his wife
Take two very old chamberlains and overtake them
on the North Sea
Provide each of them with a comet in the bottom
Seven comets each!
Telegraph:
If the city of Trondheim receives them it will be
bombed
If the tallow field releases them it will be bombed
Now you must signal:
Larger ships arrive
Don't you see there, in the radio! Larger ships
on their way. Signal a warning!
All small strawberry boats you must say shall go
ashore and go to sleep
—Come and help me. I am disappearing.
He is about to transform me, the god in the corner
over there (whispering)

[Monolog med dess hustru
Tag två extra gamla kammarherrar och hinn upp dem
på Nordsjön
Förse dem med var sin komet i änden
Sju kometer var!
Telegrafera:
Om staden Trondheim tar emot dem kommer den att
bombas
Om talgfältet släpper ut dem kommer det att bombas
Nu måste du signalera:

despite the fact that no conscious strategy was behind the design of the poem, it must be assumed that Ekelöf found it successful in so far as he included it in his collection.

We do not know what criteria Ekelöf considered, but I think the poem is interesting because it captures the three main elements that Ekelöf ascribes to Surrealism in his introduction to *fransk surrealism*. Thus, not only do I perceive the poem as producing a Surrealist scenario; I think it can be read as a reflection of what Ekelöf regarded as the constitutive features of Surrealism. In the beginning of his book, he emphasizes that Surrealism is a revolutionary movement. He perceives Surrealism as an effort to free the human being from outer social as well as inner moral constraints; as an attempt at a radical change in which humanity and not society comes first and is indicative of the development of the future. Furthermore, Surrealism represents a revolt of the aesthetics. It is a rebellion against what Ekelöf calls the dominance of aesthetics over art; form over content. According to Ekelöf, the essence of the Surrealist program can be summarized in the following paragraphs: “Society should be guided by man, morality should be guided by instincts, art should be guided by the unimpeded impression—and not the other way around” (Ekelöf [1933] 1962, p. 13).

An understanding of “Monolog med dess hustru” can take its starting point in these three aspects. Despite the fact that in a new preface to the re-release of *fransk surrealism* in 1962, Ekelöf clearly discredited his own former representation of Surrealism, I believe that the poem encourages a similar change, socially as well as morally and aesthetically. Furthermore, Ekelöf’s subsequent criticism of Surrealism was primarily aimed at the form in which Surrealism was practiced, whereas its fundamental beliefs remained in accordance with his own view of life.⁴ I will address this later, but it is important to mention that in this preface, Ekelöf also seems to pave the way for a distinction between Surrealism as a historical movement and as a modal phenomenon in so far as he begins by placing Surrealism in the past, but concludes by saying that Surrealism has existed at all times (Ekelöf [1933] 1962, p. 9).

“Monolog med dess hustru” is a rebellious poem. To the extent that it can be paraphrased, its main part at first invites the fabrication of a living bomb (ll. 1–3), then proceeds to voice a threat (ll. 4–6), and finally depicts a concrete danger and orders a warning to be given against this (ll. 7–11). In this final part, the distance from the described scene disappears to some extent. The approach is more intimate and addresses a ‘you’, and the scenery becomes present. Still, the dominant mode of the poem is imperative and, in accordance with the action it encourages, it is socially and morally provocative. Its overall expression represents an artistic revolt.

The socially rebellious perspective of the poem is evident from the description of the two very old chamberlains who are to be used as bomb material (l. 1). A chamberlain holds a social position that speaks of an old hierarchical structure which, in addition to dividing people into masters and servants, also deprives the servants of their rebellion potential by holding them in a similar structure, divided by rank. Furthermore, Trondheim, which was the first seat of the Crown in Norway, is mentioned as one of the places at risk of being bombed. The poem marks a concrete distance to this center of power by mentioning the telegraph, which operates from a distance. The spatial relationship of the poem is essential, and in contrast to the negatively loaded elements, the spatial distance is minimized as regards the positive dimensions of the poem: Here you do not use the telegraph, but signals, and what you signal is no longer a threat, but a warning. Those who are being warned and thus protected are “All small strawberry boats” [Alla små jordgubbsbåtar] (l. 11). The poem takes sides with that which is

⁴ In *Ensamheten, döden och drömmarna. Studier över ett motivkomplex i Gunnar Ekelöfs diktning* (1971) Bengt Landgren discusses Ekelöf’s complex relationship to European Surrealism. He discusses how Ekelöf is launched as a Surrealist poet, but distances himself from this movement and instead points to his relationship to earlier poetry, including Lautréamont, Rimbaud and Mallarmé (Landgren 1971, p. 95). While Ekelöf expresses a positive attitude towards Surrealism in a number of articles from the beginning of the 1930s, he criticizes the movement in, among other texts, “En återblick” (1940) and *Självsyn* (1947). However, Ekelöf is primarily critical of the method of Surrealism, even while its perception of life remains in agreement with his own.

small, earthy, sweet and red, which are the connotations associated with the strawberry boats, and thus we may also read the poem as an invitation to re-map current power conditions.

In parallel to this social revolt, the poem also plays with common moral norms. Obviously, it is offensive to fabricate living bombing material and to present threats. Furthermore, the request to stuff the chamberlains with comets, as if they were chickens about to be roasted in the oven, is not just a demotion, but also a provocation of taste. In addition, the seven comets represent absurd oversizing, and the number of seven in itself has religious allusions. Therefore, by implication, the religious order is also subject to degradation. If we include the last paragraph of the poem (its last three lines), we see that god is not spelled with a capital G; rather he appears to be one god among others who has been forced into a distanced corner. While seemingly elevating the dream and inspiration, the passage opposes a traditional religious perception of existence and to some extent distorts the classic romantic idea of divine inspiration.

However, the most powerful revival of the poem takes place in relation to art itself. The visual appearance of the poem represents a revolt against classical lyrics. The poem has a very asymmetrical and unrestricted appearance: Its lines are of very uneven lengths and include from one word to lines that exceed the space of the individual line and include the next. This unordered visual image reflects a rhythmic instability that varies between ultrashort passages and longer cadences. As the poem progresses and the content becomes more chaotic, a further breakdown of form occurs. The occurrence of short sentences becomes more frequent (ll. 7–9), as do the contrasts (see ll. 9–10 and the first line of the second paragraph). The visual and rhythmic appearances of the poem break with a classic aesthetic expression, and there is no rhyming or linguistic melodiousness, no seductive or suggestive elements. On the contrary, the form is hard and direct, as testified by the large number of exclamation marks, colons and italics. The poem practices a short style: a compressed and elliptical message in an antipoetic and unsentimental form. It can itself be regarded as a mode of expression similar to that of telegraphing and signaling. However, as Anders Mortensen mentions in *Tradition och originalitet hos Gunnar Ekelöf* (2000), another genre is also at stake, as the stuffing of the chamberlains alludes the laconic expression of the food recipe (Mortensen 2000, p. 219).

In an essay in *Blandade kort* (1957) about the cookbook writer Cajsa Warg, Ekelöf takes a special interest in this genre. Here he emphasizes that even the food recipe can grow to poetic heights: “much of her cuisine [. . .] has in time become so unlikely, sometimes almost epic and sometimes touching, that it has risen to the dignity of the grotesque. These dishes are no longer food, they are poems!” (Ekelöf 1957, p. 14). In his comment, Ekelöf highlights not only the poetic qualities of the antipoetic, but also the grotesque, which is yet another example of consistency between “Monolog med dess hustru” and Cajsa Warg’s recipes.

In continuation of this parallel between the food recipe and the poem, we now return to the discussion about Ekelöf’s relationship with European Surrealism and its connection with his view of life. In his article “Från dadaism till surrealism” (1934), Ekelöf describes the ideological foundation of Surrealism as a feature that distinguishes it from many other modern movements, for which, according to Ekelöf, it was formal inspiration rather than ideas that intoxicated (Ekelöf 1934, p. 34). Moreover, just as the Surrealists pleaded in favor of a reversal of norms and of a strengthening of both the spiritual and social proletariat, Ekelöf’s poetry speaks for the reconsideration of the values that characterize modern western society. He is in accord with the impulse of Surrealism when underlining the authenticity of pure inspiration, the antiesthetic and that which is normally underestimated. And even though, in his preface to the 1962 publication of *fransk surrealism*, Ekelöf went to great length to distance himself from his youth identification, his rejection is far from unambiguous. The essay “En återblick”, reprinted in *Blandade kort* from 1957 and taking stock of Surrealism, is sure enough written from a critical distance, weighing both the pros and cons of the doctrines and results of Surrealism. However, Surrealism is conferred a lasting influence in quite a number of ways: Surrealism is credited for having triggered a powerful launch of ‘the revaluation machinery’; for having spotlighted neglected sides

of the human being, and for having broken with the traditional understanding of poetry. The same features apply to Ekelöf.

3. The Mystery of Dreams

As our final example of dream poems within the modernist tradition, we shall look at Tomas Tranströmer's "Drömseminarium" from *Det vilda torget*, a poem which is also clearly linked to Surrealism. In Tranströmer's case, however, it is even more difficult to distinguish between what is the expression of a (late) Surrealist impulse, or rather of general psychological interest. Tranströmer worked as a psychologist, and in this capacity took a scientific interest in the mental life of humans as well as in the significance of dreams.

In Tranströmer's writings, the dream is an extremely important subject. Already in Urban Torhamn's early article, "Tomas Tranströmers poetiska metod" (Torhamn 1961), the importance of the dream and the author's affinity for European Surrealism is underlined. This also applies to Kjell Espmark's book *Resans formler* (1983), which emphasizes Tranströmer's positive assessment of the dream and draws a parallel to Surrealism: "In the assessment of the sparkling reality of the dream and in the sense that this gives 'our life balance', Tranströmer really comes close to Surrealism" (Espmark 1983, p. 56f.). Similar points of view appear in Staffan Bergsten's *Den trösterika gåtan* (1989), and in his *Koncentrationens konst* (1999) Niklas Schiöler stresses once again that the dream is one of the most common motives in Tranströmer's poetry. Schiöler also maintains that what constitutes the primary similarities between Tranströmer and the Surrealist movement is "the attitude to the dream as an anxious and fascinating source of both unexplored experiences and human knowledge" (Schiöler 1999, p. 225). Moreover, Tranströmer shares the use of an overwhelming amount of imagery with Surrealism.

However, Schiöler considers not only the pros but also the cons of Tranströmer's position in a late Surrealist tradition. In his attitude to writing, Tranströmer differs from a classic Surrealist position. Schiöler finds that he is more in line with Lundkvist and Ekelöf's criticism of *écriture automatique*, and in contrast to Surrealism's approval of an unrestrained writing style, Tranströmer's poems represent a very conscious formative process. His realistic approach, normal punctuation (after 1950), use of traditional verses and a non-revolutionary attitude also point away from Surrealism, according to Schiöler (1999, p. 230). However, while it seems sensible to speak about a moderated version of Surrealism in Tranströmer, it is important to stress his connection with the Surrealist tradition, especially as regards its relation to psychoanalysis. In his understanding of the dream as a guide to the unconscious, and thus, to a reality of another order, he is in keeping with Surrealism.

"Drömseminarium" can be seen as one long development of a dream theme which forms a composite view of the relationship between the outer and inner reality, the visible and the invisible, actualization and oblivion.

Dream Seminar

Four thousand million on earth.
 They all sleep, they all dream.
 Faces throng, and bodies, in each dream—
 the dreamt-of people are more numerous
 than us. But take no space...
 You doze off at the theatre perhaps,
 in mid-play your eyelids sink.
 A fleeting double-exposure: the stage
 before you out-manuevered by a dream.
 Then no more stage, it's you.
 The theatre in the honest depths!
 The mystery of the overworked director!

Perpetual memorizing of new plays. . .
A bedroom. Night.
The darkened sky is flowing through the room.
The book that someone fell asleep from lies
still open
sprawling wounded at the edge of the bed.
The sleeper's eyes are moving,
they're following the text without letters
in another book—
illuminated, old-fashioned, swift.
A dizzying commedia inscribed
within the eyelids' monastery walls.
A unique copy. Here, this very moment.
In the morning, wiped out.
The mystery of the great waste!
Annihilation. As when suspicious men
in uniforms stop the tourist—
open his camera, unwind the film
and let the daylight kill the pictures:
thus dreams are blackened by the light of day.
Annihilated or just invisible?
There is a kind of out-of-sight dreaming
that never stops. Light for other eyes.
A zone where creeping thoughts learn to walk.
Faces and forms regrouped.
We're moving on a street, among people
in blazing sun.
But just as many—maybe more—
we don't see
are also there in dark buildings
high on both sides.
Sometimes one of them comes to the window
and glances down on us. ⁵

[Drömseminarium

Fyra miljarder människor på jorden.
Och alla sover, alla drömmar.
I varje dröm trängs ansikten och kroppar—
de drömda människorna är fler än vi.
Men de tar ingen plats. . .
Det händer att du somnar på teatern.
Mitt under pjäsen sjunker ögonlocken.
En kort stunds dubbelexponering: scenen
där framme överflyglas av en dröm.
Sen finns det ingen scen mer, den är du.
Teatern i det ärliga djupet!

⁵ Translated by Robin Fulton in Tomas [Tranströmer](#) (2002): *New Collected poems*, pp. 141–42.

Mysteriet med den överansträngde
 teaterdirektören!
 De ständiga nyinstuderingarna...
 Ett sovrum. Det är natt.
 Den mörka himlen flyter genom rummet.
 Den bok som någon somnade ifrån
 är fortfarande uppslagen
 och ligger skadskjuten på sängkanten.
 Den sovandes ögon rör sig,
 de följer den bokstavslösa texten
 i en annan bok—
 illuminerad, ålderdomlig, snabb.
 En hisnande commedia som präntas
 innanför ögonlockens klostermurar.
 Ett enda exemplar. Det finns just nu!
 I morgon är alltsammans utstruket.
 Mysteriet med det stora slöseriet!
 Utplåningen... Som när turisten hejdas
 av misstänksamma män i uniform—
 de öppnar kameran, ruller ut hans film
 och låter solen döda bilderna:
 så mörkläggs drömmarna av dagens ljus.
 Utplånat eller bara osynligt?
 Det finns ett utom—synhåll—drömmande
 som alltid pågår. Ljus för andra ögon.
 En zon där krypande tankar lär sig gå.
 Ansikten och gestalter omgrupperas.
 Vi rör oss på en gata, bland människor
 i solgasset.
 Men lika många eller fler
 som vi inte ser
 finns inne i de mörka byggnader
 som reser sig på båda sidorna.
 Ibland går någon av dem fram till fönstret
 och kastar en blick ner på oss.]

The title “Drömseminarium” is informative of the mode of the poem. It tells us that the poem relates to a scientific discourse, and the poem also develops as a third-sided composition whose *exordium* (ll. 1–5), *exemplum* (ll. 6–34) and *peroratio* (ll. 35–46) evoke associations of a scientific statement or lecture. However, if at first glance the poem seems to relate to a scientific discourse, a closer inspection reveals a different picture. Not only are there actually far more fluid boundaries between the parts of the text than indicated by the above classification; a number of elements even undermine a common scientific perspective.

Already at the end of the first part of the poem, a discrepancy becomes clear between that which is scientifically demonstrable and measurable on the one hand, and the more fleeting and metaphysical nature of the dream on the other. This discrepancy reflects that although there are more people in dreams than in reality, they do not occupy space. The significance of the dream cannot be measured using the external standards of the world. Therefore, the examples used in the attempt to capture the essence of the dream also dissociate from a scientific area and relate to art; the theater and the book constitute the starting points of the description of the dream. Art—especially in its modern forms—represents a break with reality; art creates a world of its own, and so do dreams.

In the first example (ll. 6–13), a double exposure is described. While something is happening on a theater stage, for a moment the spectator falls asleep and is carried to another stage. The outer and inner dramas merge, and a new scene takes over: “The theater in the honest depths!” [Teatern i det ärliga djupet!] (l. 11). In the second example (ll. 14–28), the focus is on the difference between an open book in a dark bedroom and the illuminated comedy taking place behind closed eyelids. The latter dichotomy then leads to what we may either call a third example or consider an appendix to the second (ll. 29–34). Again, the dream is compared to a medium of an artistic character, namely the photograph. The example focuses on a situation in which a camera is opened, and the pictures are wiped out by the light. This is compared to what happens to dreams as night changes into day: “så mörkläggs drömmarna av dagens ljus” [so dreams are darkened by the light of the day] (l. 33).

While the example of the theatre related to the evening, and the second example focused on a nightly room, in the third example we move on into the day. The examples thus allude to a traditional time-period of sleep. However, while the first two descriptions end in an almost dethroning summary of the experiences in these remarks: “The mystery of the overworked director!” [Mysteriet med den överansträngde/teaterdirektören!] (ll. 12–13) and “The mystery of great waste!” [Mysteriet med det stora slöseriet!] (l. 28), the third example remains more open. In the latter no attempt is made at a final averting fictionalization. Instead the question arises: “Annihilated or just invisible?” [Utplånat eller bara osynligt?] (l. 34). The mode of questioning in itself is essentially open, and likewise, the poem proceeds to invite another and more abstract way of reflecting the significance of the dream. The last part of the poem (ll. 35–46) does not address the dream as we recognize it from our own world of experience, i.e., as an activity that occurs for limited periods of time and often during the night. Instead, we move towards layers that transcend normal experience and time.

Having referred to states of dreaming that relate to the rhythms of the human being and the day, the poem moves towards a perception of the dream as an activity that is constantly taking place behind the visible world. It refers to the subconscious in the description of “a kind of out-of-sight dreaming/that newer stops” [ett utom-synshåll-drömmande/som alltid pågår] (ll. 35–36). A particularly interesting metaphor is: “A zone where creeping thoughts learn to walk” [En zon där krypande tankar lär sig gå] (verse 37). In this metaphor, the subconscious is depicted as the playpen of thoughts, and we start to imagine that behind the thoughts of which we are aware, others are slowly growing up before reaching us. However, many indications suggest that the poem does not remain in this parallelization between the dream and the subconscious. Rather, it moves towards even deeper layers. The poem takes the form of a set of Chinese boxes in which every new form of the dream is hiding yet another and more profound version of the nature of dream life.

Staffan Bergsten and Niklas Schiöler agree that the final image of the poem reveals a dimension that transcends both Freud’s notions of the unconscious and Jung’s psychology of archetypes (Bergsten 1989, p. 139; Schiöler 1999, p. 182). When the final image repeats the initial image of the poem, this therefore has a deeper resonance. The dreamed people are not just those who actually occupy our dreams and those who we therefore see, in some sense. They are also people who, while remaining unseen in the dark, see us (ll. 41–46). What was initially factual information converging with a scientific discourse is ultimately transformed into a metaphysical statement of a rather indeterminate nature. However, trying to explain the components of the image, which is the interpretative method proposed by Espmark, Bergsten and Schiöler, is not the only option. It is also an option to focus on the poem’s form.

As the final picture clearly relates to the beginning of the poem, the poem itself resembles the figure of the palimpsest, which it also thematizes in its many double exposures. What happens over the course of the poem is that a world reappears that had otherwise been erased. The people who no longer pass the road in sunlight—which can be understood as an expression of the real and conscious—have therefore not disappeared completely. They have only moved to a more darkened side of existence. The poem represents a holistic perception of life where that which has disappeared is still present on

another level.⁶ It seems to suggest that as our dreams illuminate inner worlds that exist in parallel with the external reality, a space for a larger history that exceeds our usual anchoring in time and space also exists. What seems to have disappeared is still going on, even without us to witness it. Thus, in Tomas Tranströmer's surreal universe, the dream is not just a guide to the inner world of man. It also points to the existence of worlds unfolding in parallel with and beyond what is immediately given, and in that way transcends the Surrealist position.

4. Conclusions

This investigation of dream poems within the modernist tradition has focused on central forms types of dream poems from the perspective of Surrealism, which is the modern European movement that has foregrounded the importance of the dream. In Artur Lundkvist's "Om natten älskar jag någon . . ." we meet a woman of dreams in more than one sense. The nightly dream forms a positive counterpart to reality and creates contact with a both fascinating and frightening woman who cannot be reached at daytime. Thus, the poem supports Surrealism's high evaluation of dreams and its belief in the subconscious powers of the human being. The poems by Gunnar Ekelöf and Tomas Tranströmer reflect the Surrealist movement and the dream on a more general level. Ekelöf's "Monolog med dess hustru" not only encompasses the different methods used by the Surrealists when trying to give voice to the subconscious. The poem is emblematic of Surrealism in that it represents a similar revolt of a social, moral and aesthetic character. In "Drömseminarium", however, Tranströmer sheds light on the very nature of the dream and in doing so, he even moves beyond the level of the subconscious mind. In addition to highlighting the land of inner life, Tranströmer's investigation of the dream creates a space for a larger and more fundamental story which takes place without our knowledge.

Furthermore, these three dream poems are representative of the different understandings of the function of the dream initially described in Hugo Friedrich and Kurt Leonhard's writings on modernism. In Lundkvist's poem, we are introduced to a positive vision of the dream corresponding to Friedrich's understanding of the dream as a release from reality. Ekelöf's poem, on the contrary, is more on a par with Leonhard's perception of the dream, as it is oriented towards primitive and fundamental layers in the human being. Finally, we have seen that Tranströmer's poem represents a continuation of the Surrealist tradition while at the same time transcending this tradition.

If we look at the poems in a chronological order, therefore, it seems that Lundkvist and Ekelöf, who have a share in Surrealism as a historical movement, also represent the most regular Surrealist positions. This is indeed the case, although Ekelöf's poem appears in a collection from 1955. Additionally, Tranströmer's poem points to Surrealism as a movement that remains an important source of inspiration throughout the twentieth century. Thus, the fact that the poems originate from collections from the 1930s, 1950s and 1980s, not only implies that dream poems are an important category within Nordic Lyrical Modernism. It also indicates that a movement such as Surrealism is effective far beyond the boundaries of time with which it is usually associated. Surrealism is not just a phenomenon in European literature that belongs to the art of the 1920s and 1930s. Surrealism is also a mode of expression that throws light on the importance of the dream and the subconscious across time boundaries.⁷

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

⁶ In *The Sense of Time in the Poetry of Tomas Tranströmer* (1985), Joanna Bankier also addresses this universalist aspect. Bankier writes that in the poems of Tranströmer, the human being is in intimate contact with nature. Referring to Breton, she concludes: "All things in nature are inter-dependent. And the connections continue, far beyond the visible world into the underworld of the spirit and the dead and into our own unconscious. Man branches out into the shady regions of dream and the dead in a vast system of 'vases communicantes'" (Bankier 1985, p. 59).

⁷ This article is based on a chapter named "Drömmedigte—Modernismens surreelle tilstande" from my book *Nedbrydningens opbyggelighed. Litterære historier i det 20. århundredes nordiske modernistiske lyrik* (Mønster 2009). In this chapter, I also discuss poems by Gunnar Björling, Ivan Malinowski, and Henrik Nordbrandt.

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